

*Academic Rigor: An Explanation or an Apology?*

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Academic rigor is a topic that elicits some rather strong feelings. I've heard students complain that the courses they are taking are too easy and that we don't demand enough of them. Those students want more rigor in their courses. I've heard faculty complain that students are poorly prepared, have distressingly short attention-spans, and seem to be more interested in parties than in studying. Those faculty don't think that students want or will tolerate increased academic rigor. I've heard parents demand that we refund their money for a course because their child didn't really learn anything and that faculty are anything but rigorous in the classroom. I have also listened to all manner of views and opinions across the spectrum on this topic. So, a discussion, or a series of discussions, around this topic of academic rigor is certain to be interesting, perhaps contentious and, hopefully, helpful and illuminating. It would be especially helpful if any insights generated by the discussions could be used to actually improve what we do as teacher/scholars.

With that in mind I was delighted to learn that the first issue of *Universitas* was to be devoted to the topic of academic rigor. I was also delighted to be invited to write a piece for that inaugural issue, since I do, in fact, feel rather strongly about the topic. My delight diminished somewhat as I began to think about writing the piece. Upon reflection, it seemed a strangely daunting task. Then I saw a very straightforward question raised by Scott Cawelti: "What IS academic rigor"? Cawelti's question served as a catalyst for what follows.

"Introduction to Linguistics" (Liberal Arts Core) was my most favorite course to teach at the University of Vermont. When I began teaching it I had fifteen students enrolled. Eleven years later, there were more than 110 students. In my opinion there were at least two reasons for that increase. For one thing, I was a good teacher. I was three times nominated for the best teacher of the year award and was once first runner-up for that high honor. My student evaluations were uniformly strong and I loved teaching that

course. The second reason for the increase in enrollment was, I am sure, that it had a well-deserved reputation for being an easy course. It was perceived to lack academic rigor. I taught it that way on purpose, with malice aforethought. I “could” have made it extraordinarily difficult. I approached some of Naom Chomsky’s theories, and used as a non-required reference Chomksy and Halle’s book *The Sound Pattern of English* (Cambridge, 1968) along with the more recent (and more readable) book by Steven Pinker *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York, 1994). These are not transparent theories. I had a whole set of lectures on acoustic theory, which has some real complexity. I opened the doors to neural functions in language production. However, I did everything I could to keep it simple. You see, some of the students in this course were enrolled because it was a requirement of their major, that is in Communicative Disorders and Psychology. I held Professorial rank in both of those departments. Some pre-med and nursing students were enrolled because they knew I took a medical approach to much of the course, and that I held Professorial rank in the Department of Neurology in the College of Medicine. All of those students were looking at a good many courses down the road that would involve plenty of rigor. As the students in Communicative Disorders and Psychology would be taking more work in the future that involved Linguistics, I intended my course for those students to be a very basic introduction to the beauties of this field of study. The great bulk of the students in that course, however, were likely never to take a course in Linguistics again and I wanted to awaken in them an interest in thinking about issues we discussed in class. My hope was that sometime, as an adult, they might open up an issue of the New Yorker and come across an article about Chomsky (there was a great series fifteen years ago) or a piece by Pinker and then they would say: “Hey, I had this crazy old prof back at Vermont who lectured about this stuff and it was pretty cool,” and they would be motivated to read the piece and, perhaps, ask some questions about it. If my cream-puff course awakened some interest and caused students to enjoy, at least a little bit, the act of thinking and asking questions and seeking answers to their own questions, then I absolutely did not care if they could go to the board and re-create Gunnar Fant’s “Acoustic Theory of Speech Production.” No academic rigor, right?

On the other hand, I also taught a course while on the faculty of the Institute of Linguistics at the University of Stockholm, on Research Methods. Now, that one had some rigor to it. The nature of the beast, Research Methods, demands doing certain things by the book. Academic rigor, right?

The operational definition of academic rigor in the classroom is going to depend a great deal upon the particular class being taught. The two courses I mention above may have both been quite rigorous, but in very different ways.

In my introductory course I didn't want them to memorize detail and I didn't want to force-feed theory to them. I wanted them to ask questions. I began the course by explaining that I expected them to ask me these two questions, and to do so often: "What do you mean?" and "How do you know." Some of them did – and that was all I needed to feel that I was on the right track. Getting first-year students to do that may just require a little rigor.

I once had the great pleasure of sitting in a corner of a room high up in the Wenner-Gren building in Stockholm, talking with Morris Halle, co-author of the seminal book by Chomsky and Halle. He spoke at length of his belief that we spend too much time in the classroom teaching as if all the answers are in the back of the book; as if what is accepted as fact and truth today will remain so forever and we must teach it, rigorously, as some sort of dogma. In fact, he said, what wins a Nobel Prize today may elicit only a ho-hum in twenty years because what we do in research is strive to disprove theories. So, he said, his work with Chomsky, in *Sound Patterns of English*, was bound to be shown to be wrong in many of its facets, and his goal as a Professor was not to rigorously force his theories upon students but, rather, to rigorously encourage them to question his theories and find the errors in them. A rather different kind of rigor.

As we consider academic rigor on our campus, and I very much hope we do take up that discussion, we must keep that basic question raised by Scott Cawelti very much in mind: What IS academic rigor? It may be in the eye of the beholder. It may, surely it must,

vary with the course and sometimes vary within a given course. For me, rigor will always be doing whatever is needed to enable our students to ask good questions, to seek their own answers, to embrace change, to be comfortable with ambiguity, and to express themselves well and clearly in their writing and speaking. For others, classroom rigor may be something entirely different and much more explicitly defined.

This is why it was so difficult for me to begin writing on this topic. I can only paraphrase the Supreme Court justice (was it Potter Stewart?) by saying that I can't define academic rigor but I know it when I see it; however at least it puts the issue out on the table. Now, hopefully, we can begin to take a closer look and pose some questions of our own.

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